

Archival Record - Source MetaData Page

Standardized Master Template – Gene W. Poor Digital Archive

Collection: GeneW. Poor Digital Archive

File Name: 1993_kentalumnimagazine_therealityofillusion_final.pdf

Publication / Source: Kent State Alumni Magazine

Pages Included: Cover, article pages 12-17, back cover

Date Of Publication / Event: Fall of 1993

Title Of Work: The Reality of Illusion

Author / Reporter: Staff

Publisher / Organization: Kent State University

Place Of Publication : Kent, Ohio

Captured By: Dr. Gene W. Poor

Date Captured: November 2025

Format: PDF Scanned 300 dpi color

Original Format: Printed Magazine

Description/ Subject: Feature article profiling Dr. Gene W. Poor's early work in entrepreneurial ventures in animatronics and design.

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Notes: Also includes information about Tom Kuebler an early junior partner of Lifeformations and Alumni of Kent State University

Resulting File Set:

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1993_kentalumnimagazine_therealityofillusion.pdf

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Kent Alumni

THIS ISSUE

Waking up in the
city that never sleeps

Beyond recovery

The reality of

iusion



Behind the scenes with Kent alumni Gene Poor and Tom Kuebler

THE REALITY OF *ILLUSION*

STORY BY: KELLY ALBRECHT



LifeFormations takes the concept of personification to the fullest extreme with this talking oven. Clients use animation in this way to attract attention to their products at trade shows.

We arrived at the building half an hour late. Bowling Green was a good two hour drive from Kent and the summer rain shower slowed us down. We quickly unpacked the car and headed for the door with the sign "LifeFormations" above it. Inside, we were greeted by the deafening sound of an electric saw and the sight of various body parts scattered on a workbench. You know, heads, a couple of eyeballs, a naked torso or two.

As we contemplated our possible mistake of wandering onto the set of a "Friday the Thirteenth" movie, a man glanced up and walked toward us. Maybe it was the bright yellow Daffy Duck and Sylvester tie that warmed me, but I instantly liked this guy with the wire-rimmed glasses and outstretched hand.

As we exchanged names, I again glanced around the spacious warehouse-turned-art-studio. Behind me was a face -- a man's face as tall as me, with a huge nose, moving eyebrows, and a cigar tucked in between his pale red lips. I soon learned that this strange object was an oven -- a talking oven. It's creator is a man named Tom Kuebler, undoubtedly one of Kent's most riveting alumni. And the guy with the funky tie? That's Dr. Gene Poor -- Kent alumnus, college professor, author, and president and owner of LifeFormations, Animated and Static Characters.

To put it simply, Kuebler and Poor are in the business of creating machines that give the illusion of life. In the industry, that's known as animatronics. A classic example of the craft is the Disneyland exhibit in





which the American presidents appear in lifelike form and a walking, talking Abe Lincoln takes center stage.

In this studio, the works were equally as impressive. With the motto "We can make anybody or anything come alive," Kuebler and Poor have created a large and fascinating dent in the field of lifelike animation. Their clients are vast, and unlike others in the business who design animation solely for museums and amusement parks, LifeFormations taps into an additional market of trade shows, restaurants, zoos, even a dentist's office.

"This is Humphrey Bogart," said Kuebler, motioning to a head with a torso and fedora. "He's going to a restaurant in France. The big rage in France right now is American fast food cuisine and there's an eight-story restaurant in Paris that is dedicated to the drive-in theater." Bogart was to be accompanied by his pals John Wayne and James Dean both in various stages of creation.

After a quick tour of the building's workshops, studios, and offices, the Kent alums led us into a small conference room. A very old woman quietly sat in a chair, staring out the window, every vein in her wrinkly skin looking just as real as her three decaying teeth. Blackwater Hattie, as the woman's affectionately known, was joined by a butler, Frankenstein's monster, and an ancient Indian named Walter Blindcrow.

Kuebler, the sculptor behind the characters, was a Kent art major who studied sculpture, metalsmithing, and glassblowing as a student. Tall, thin, and dressed in a mischievous grin, Kuebler is credited with giving his characters personality, or better known at LifeFormations as, "Kueblerization."

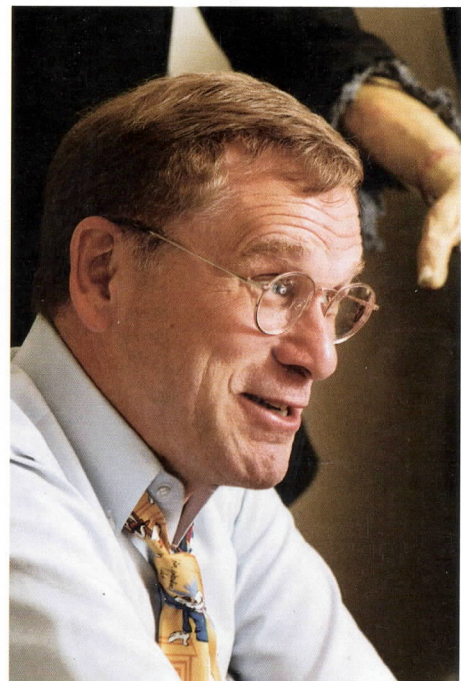
As do many Kent alumni, Kuebler, '84, credits professor Henry Halem as pushing him in the right direction. "I started at Kent in graphic design," explained Kuebler, ducking under Frankenstein's arms to take a seat. "One night Henry gave a lecture and showed slides of works from people he admired. He talked about the life of an artist as doing what you love. 'Do what you love,' he said, 'and don't worry about cash.'"

Kuebler listened to Halem and the next day changed his major to crafts. "People hear crafts, and think basket

.....**Nosferatu, or Count Orlok**



Tom Kuebler, sculptor and vice president of art and design



Gene Poor, president of LifeFormations

weaving," he said. "But it was learning to use materials -- any materials that you could think of to incorporate into your art. Bruce Metcalf was my adviser and mentor and he taught me to find and master any material that I could. So I did, and we both kind of dubbed me as a sculptural illustrator. That's really what I turned out to be.

"That got me into the vein of doing characters versus just art and painting and sculpture," the alumnus continued. "Then I had a heck of a time finding a job and I wound up being a bartender for a year. It turned out to be an excellent job for studying character." "Yea," jumped in Poor, scanning the bizarre figures posed around the room, "he's waited on most of these people!"

Kuebler chuckled. "Finally I met Tom Wilson, the guy who does *Ziggy*. He bought a few of my pieces and we became good friends," he explained. "Wilson wanted me to work for him at a toy company he had started called 'Those Characters From Cleveland.' So I designed toys for a year but ended up having a lot of problems with the upper management there.

"In the meantime, a friend of a friend had seen my work back in Kent and called me up to say there was a guy named Gene doing a lecture in Kent

and who does animatronic talking robots. Here's his phone number.

"So I called Gene and sent him some slides of my work. He called right back and said 'get out here!'"

Poor, who received his bachelor's and master's degrees from Kent in 1966, taught briefly at the University before heading to Bowling Green. "I came to Bowling Green to teach and I started a program called visual communications which was a little bit of everything -- television, filmmaking, photography, print, and exhibitry," he said.

"I was consulting for a company in Toledo and I developed a division that built robots. We did maybe three characters a year, enough to get things going. When I saw Kuebler's work, it dropped me to my knees. I had never seen such character. I couldn't believe it!"

Kuebler, at the time, was building toy prototypes. "We were an idea company," he said. "I would create an idea in 3-D form that you could pop out on the table for a client. Kenner or Mattel would pick it up and do something with it. So I was already pretty well versed in making molds and using urethane and silicone -- materials involved in this industry. The first thing I would do when I got home was get out in the garage and start building these guys," he said, wav-

ing his hand around the crowded room. "Yea," added Poor, "And to bring them to life was more than he could handle!"

Kuebler had been building static characters and Poor had sent him a tape of his company's work in animation. "I thought, wow, this is amazing -- truly," Kuebler said. "I came up to visit him, and the president of that company instantly fell in love with me. It was like, 'When can you start?'"

Eventually, an opportunity arose and Tom was able to make the move from Cleveland to Toledo. "We knew that we had something good but the robotics division was always hampered by the fact that we were under the wing of somebody else," Poor explained. "The company ran into some really bad times, so as soon as we saw the opportunity to buy it, we did and moved to Bowling Green with Tom Suter, one of my former students. So the three of us formed LifeFormations and it's taken off so that we can't hold onto it."

The company today has grown to 12 employees comprised of welders, designers, fabricators, costumers, and computer programmers. "Animation is making the robot move like a real skeleton, not like a machine," Kuebler said. "When we shift a weight, for example,



the shoulder reacts. In this business, you price it on the amount of movement you put within the character -- just like selling a car with options. You don't sell moves that will be so ineffective that they'll ruin the whole illusion." The entire process, from sculpture to programming, takes between six and eight weeks. And the final tab? "\$25,000 is a starting price for an animated character -- that's a good reference," Poor said. "That's enough moves to make it look very real and come alive."

Kuebler agreed. "We're barely containing what's happening here because we are tackling markets other than what our competitors are tackling -- and frankly haven't even thought about."

One of these markets is the trade show market, where the Honeywell Corp. (proud parent of a talking computer) serves as a major client. "Most of the people we work for want their product sold or recognized," Poor said. "The trade show is an arena for distributors to market their products to a specific client, for example, the market for Honeywell is contractors. There's a trade show for everything and the guy who puts on the best dog and pony show wins!"

Another eye catcher for Honeywell is the stone grey bust that "comes alive" at trade shows. With moveable hands and feet, the statue narrates the reasons that a Honeywell heating and cooling system is best for your building. "With Honeywell, this stuff travels around trade shows and comes back to us for upkeep and repairs," Kuebler said.

"We also did a presentation for the Toledo Zoo. The zoo was in a dilemma -- they had used dinamation the year before and their profits went off the charts. They wanted to follow up with something else the following summer but didn't have much of a budget to throw into it. They came to us and we proposed a whole series of things called zooniverse -- animals collected from other planets in other galaxies.

"We would show what those animals did in their environments -- in their ecosystems -- to be useful, like in the way that catfish eat the trash at the bottom of the pond," Kuebler continued. "We did a character they really liked, called a leapaguar. This thing had all kinds of capabilities -- ears to hear predators, long fingers to scamper away

with, and fingernails to dig into the soil and nutrients. Mouth movements go with the voice. It was the first time that an animated character with complete skin from head to toe had ever been done within this complexity."

Although it seems like the perfect route, Kuebler and Poor stay out of the motion picture business. "A movie character only has to last until the scene's done," Poor said. "Our stuff is always put in places where it has to work day in and day out." For example, an exhibit on Al Capone now on display in downtown Chicago (next to the Hard Rock Cafe) stands for the public from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. "That stuff, 15 pieces, all of the people involved in the Capone era, has to work over and over again."

Aside from the trade shows and special exhibits, LifeFormations has been known to make their mark at parties. "We are a custom company but we had to find some staple products," Kuebler said. "I was sitting at home one night and sculpted a butler -- the cartoon version of the movie *Arthur*. Because of the character, all we have to do is make his mouth move. A butler by nature just stands and waits for people to walk up and hang a towel over his arm. So now we lease them out.

"We also make fortune tellers, and boy, do we have fun with the things that they say," Poor said. "One customer is buying probably one fortune teller per month from us and he's doing like \$200 a day! Best of all, it has Kuebler quality in it -- that essence that he brings to his characters that even the original fortune tellers didn't have."

A poster hangs in one of the office buildings depicting a cartoon of young Tommy Kuebler dutifully writing on a classroom chalkboard the words, "I will not play in God's domain."

But one wonders how true to life this pledge really is. After all, down the hallway, a head lies on a workbench awaiting a second eye and a body. And Kuebler's creations go way beyond the scope of humans. There are sneezing pigs, talking appliances, moving gnomes, and hatching dinosaurs.

"Kuebler sees things so differently," said Poor. "The characters take a setting that our competitors aren't even

close to doing. He puts them in poses that are like snapshots out of life. Even the animated stuff -- he gives them a life beyond the moves. He just looks at the way they ought to be sitting. Before I knew him, I never knew what human defects play in life.

"It's such a joy to watch Kuebler work because he instantly takes on the personality of the character. He does probably more than 50 voices. It's fun to watch him develop that. When he was doing *Frankenstein* -- moaning -- that's all I would hear him do. Our clients fall in love with him. When I go out to sell, I take him with me and he sits on the table and I say perform for us, Tommy."

But life and work didn't come so easily for Kuebler as a child. "I had a difficult childhood because I had a lot of learning disabilities," he said. "I had dyslexia and couldn't even spell my name in third grade. For years I'm getting Ds in English and math and my attention span was terrible. But I could be by myself and that was even worse! So they put me in the cloakroom to work and the teacher would come back and say 'how're you doing?' and I had maybe 50 monster drawings and was only two lines into my project."

An accomplished ceramacist, Kuebler's mom kept the basement stocked with clay. That's where he got his start.

"I was always out in dreamland somewhere," he said. "I still have that problem so I decided I better make the best of it. I always was good in art. That's where I got my 'at-a-boys.' My brother got the awards and all the trophies, but I was good in art. So I knew if I didn't learn to do this well, then I was gonna starve. So here I am, the product of the flaws of my childhood."

"Tom comes to my classes and talks," Poor said. "Sometimes I'll have him talk about life -- and what makes you happy. It's rare when people do what they love. Kuebler and I share that honor. I've encountered literally thousands of students in my life and the ones who end up with careers that make them feel really good about themselves are so rare. It's a true blessing to do in life what you love to do. It's not an easy path to get there because you first have to discover who you are."

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